

Illinois leads in rail crossing fatalities

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BY MONIFA THOMAS Transportation Reporter (Chicago Sun-Times)

It happens almost every day like clockwork. The scenario is different each time, but Metra engineer Ken Burdick knows he'll see at least one person crossing the railroad tracks where they shouldn't be, with only a few hundred feet separating them from a potentially fatal collision with the train he is operating.

One day, it may be a group of children playing chicken with a train, seemingly unaware of another coming toward them from the opposite direction. Or it may be a woman and her children taking a shortcut to the convenience store on the other side of the tracks. At rush hour, more than a few commuters dash across the tracks at the last minute to avoid missing their train.

"People don't realize you can't stop on a dime with nine cents left over," Burdick said. "By the time you see someone, it's almost too late."

At least three times in his 38-year career, Burdick was too late, killing people who seemed to materialize out of nowhere.



RAILROAD FATALITIES IN ILLINOIS

It takes Metra Engineer Ed Lilla only a moment to recall how many people he has killed since he began operating trains 36 years ago. "Three fatalities," he said. "I've hit nine cars, three trucks and a motorcycle." Engineers say the emotional impact lasts a lifetime. (JOHN H. WHITE/SUN-TIMES)

"It's not something you ever forget," he said. Burdick won't talk about the deaths he witnessed as a freight train engineer before coming to Metra in 1990.

Rail crossing fatalities have been steadily declining in Illinois for decades, but trespassing deaths continue to outpace the number of pedestrians and motorists killed at public grade crossings.

Last year, Illinois led the country in fatalities at public grade crossings, followed by California and Texas.

Statewide, 18 people in vehicles and 12 people on foot were killed at crossings, a slight increase over 2004. Metra commuter trains were involved in eight fatal accidents, while Amtrak had two and freight railroads made up the remainder, according to data from the Federal Railroad Administration.

RAILROAD FATALITIES IN ILLINOIS

The number of people killed or injured in rail collisions has been declining in Illinois over the past 30 years.

2006

Motorists 7
Pedestrians 0
Trespassers 10
Suicides 13

78 collisions, 18 injuries

2004

Motorists 19
Pedestrians 8
Trespassers 25
Suicides 11

153 collisions, 65 injuries

SOURCE: Illinois Commerce Commission

2005

Motorists 18
Pedestrians 12
Trespassers 24
Suicides 18

145 collisions, 75 injuries

2003

Motorists 21
Pedestrians 7
Trespassers 26
Suicides 9

139 collisions, 63 injuries.

24 killed trespassing on railroad

Those figures don't include the 24 people who were killed last year while trespassing on railroad property, the Illinois Commerce Commission said. Illinois had the country's fourth highest number of trespassing deaths in 2005.

Rail safety experts note that Illinois also has more railroad track than any other state besides Texas, making exposure to train traffic more common. Chicago in particular is the busiest rail gateway in the United States, accounting for one-third of the nation's freight rail traffic. About 1,200 trains pass through the region each day.

By law, the only railroad property people in Illinois are authorized to use are commuter rail stations and public crossings, where roadways intersect the train tracks.

But even with fences and other barriers to keep them out, pedestrians often ignore the law to take shortcuts across the tracks.



11 DANGEROUS CROSSINGS

Crossings that had three or more accidents over the last six years

1 CHICAGO



Nagle: 4 accidents

2 CHICAGO



Throop: 4 accidents

3 ELMWOOD PARK



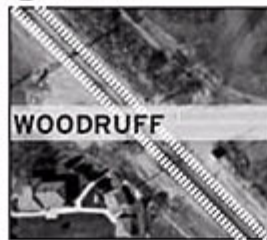
Grand: 4 accidents

4 MAYWOOD



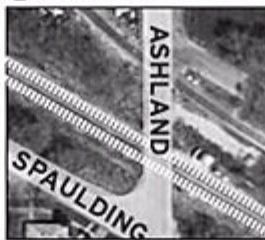
First Ave.: 3 accidents

5 JOLIET



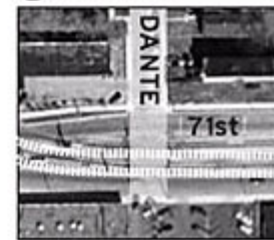
Woodruff: 3 accidents

6 HARVEY



Ashland: 3 accidents

7 CHICAGO



Dante: 3 accidents

8 CHICAGO



72nd St.: 3 accidents

9 CHICAGO



Torrence: 3 accidents

10 CHICAGO



119th St.: 3 accidents

11 DES PLAINES



Graceland: 3 accidents

Unclear how many are suicides

The decision to trespass proved fatal for 25 people in 2004 and 26 people in 2003.

Nationwide, the number of trespasser deaths hovers around 500 each year, while the overall numbers of grade crossing collisions and deaths have been falling for decades.

Researchers say trespassing is a difficult problem to fight because there hasn't been much analysis on who gets killed or injured. It isn't clear how many trespasser deaths are actually suicides, said Ian Savage, a professor of economics and transportation at Northwestern University who released a study this year on trespassing incidents.

About a third of the people struck by trains were sitting or lying down on or near the tracks, according to federal railroad data.

TOP CAUSES OF TRAIN, VEHICLE FATALITIES

2001 through March 2006

Driver did not stop (no gates)

41 fatalities

Driver drove around or through gates

28 fatalities

Driver stopped on crossing

7 fatalities

Driver stopped and then proceeded

4 fatalities

SOURCE: Federal Railroad Administration

"You would think that would sound like intentional suicide," Savage said. But a high proportion of trespassers who were killed had blood alcohol levels above the legal limit, Savage said, citing studies done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As a result, "there may not be a purely engineering solution" to stopping trespasser deaths, which occur mostly among people in their 20s and 30s, Savage said. "It may not be a matter of putting up fences; it may be more of a public health issue."

The Illinois Commerce Commission bases its annual count of rail trespassing deaths and suicides on initial reports from police and coroners.

So far this year, there have been 13 apparent suicides statewide, compared with 18 in 2005 and 11 in 2004.

While reducing the number of trespassing deaths and suicides remains a challenge, fewer people in Illinois are dying or being injured by trains at grade crossings.

Today's statistics on grade crossing accidents pale in comparison with 1976, when 100 fatalities were reported in Illinois, data from the Federal Railroad Administration show.

The reduction in crossing collisions comes at a time when rail traffic is increasing across the country, the Association of American Railroads said.

Rail safety expert Chip Pew, who is the state coordinator for Operation Lifesaver, said outreach programs, coupled with federal and local initiatives to make railroad crossings safer are mostly responsible for driving the number of deaths and injuries down in recent years.

Most train-vehicle accidents are the result of motorist error, he said. In one out of every four such crashes, the vehicle drives into the train, instead of being struck by it, Illinois Commerce Commission data shows.

'People are just not paying attention'

"You're screwing around with the radio, you're talking on the cell phone . . . you're late for work," Pew said. "People are just not paying attention."

Many pedestrians and motorists also misjudge the speed of an approaching train, giving them the false impression they can beat it.

During a recent ride with Ken Burdick and fellow Metra engineer Brian Voss, this reporter saw a boy in his late teens riding his bicycle around lowered crossing gates just before the Edgebrook station on the Milwaukee North line. He didn't slow down until Voss blew the train's horn. "That's the kind of thing you see every day," Voss said.

"You never know if they're going to stop or not," Burdick said.

Freight train can take a mile to stop

What people don't realize, Pew said, is that a freight train moving at 55 mph can take a mile or more to stop. Metra trains are typically lighter and have a shorter stopping distance, but express trains are sometimes coming into stations at 79 mph, Burdick said.

For years, safety groups and legislators have been pushing for railroad overpasses and underpasses that would keep trains separate from vehicles and pedestrians. But cost is a huge stumbling block. A single overpass can cost millions, depending on where it is located and how many lanes of traffic it would span.

Transportation agencies have invested in lower-cost improvements such as flashing lights, fences and better signs to alert people at railroad crossings.

Law enforcement also plays a role. Beginning next year, motorists driving around lowered gates or stopping on the tracks could be caught by cameras taking pictures of license plates.

They could get a \$250 ticket or community service under a new law signed by Gov. Blagojevich last month. It aims to prevent accidents like one last November in Elmwood Park, where a Metra train slammed into several vehicles stuck on the tracks at Grand Avenue.

Fifteen cars were damaged, and 16 people were injured.

Every attempt to prevent accidents counts, but for families who have lost loved ones in rail collisions, every death is one too many.

Last month, 19-year-old Marielle Anderson was riding her bike to work when she was struck and killed by a Union Pacific freight train at a crossing in southwest suburban Steger.

Anderson, a popular honor student who planned to become a lawyer, was to graduate from Bloom Trail High School the next day.

The May 23 accident occurred at Steger Road and 34th Street. The crossing gates came down to block cars from entering the tracks, but there were no gates for the part of the sidewalk Marielle was on, Steger Police Chief Richard Stultz said.

Witnesses said Marielle may have also been wearing headphones, though none were found at the scene.

Marielle was one of seven people to die so far this year at grade crossings, Pew said.

Her father, Craig Anderson, said no other family should have to suffer such a tragedy.

"My daughter should not be dead," he said. "It's not easy to lose someone who was supposed to graduate the next day and start her life."

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